

WALTER LIPPMANN

ON

THE ALL-PURPOSE MYTH



Since the end of the world war, some twenty years ago, every President has had the difficult and distasteful task of drumming up Congressional and popular support for inherently unpopular foreign policies. All the postwar Presidents have taken it for granted that they had to create the majority which they needed, and that, while some of the congressmen and some of the people might respond to argument, the others had to be scared into joining up.

Early in the day when the big measures were first proposed by the Truman Administration, the art of scaring up a majority was tested and perfected. The essential formula was that unless Congress enacted the bill, the Communists would do this or that terrible thing. Without the Marshall plan, Western Europe would be Bolshevized; without NATO, the Red Army would march to the Atlantic Ocean.

Each spring there was the same arduous business of persuading and cajoling a reluctant Congress to vote money for foreigners. This annual tugging and pulling always had a happy ending. And the reason, as the inside Administration operators used to tell each other, was that "Uncle Joe will fix it for us." As a matter of fact, Stalin never failed to fix it by doing something outrageous, such as the coup in Prague before NATO.

As a result, it has become part of the established procedure of American foreign policy to invoke the threat of Communist take-over whenever American opinion is divided. As the practice has grown, the formula has been generalized. Now we are accepting the unique burden of resisting the advance of Communism everywhere.

Endless. The Dominican affair illuminated dramatically the practical consequences. Suddenly, there were newspaper headlines telling about Marines going in opposite directions, some toward Indochina and others toward the Caribbean. Plainly, we are following a line of foreign policy along which we could, if we take the President's words seriously and literally, become engaged in an endless series of interventions. For Vietnam is not the only place in Eastern Asia where trouble can break out, nor is the Dominican Republic the only one in Latin America. Moreover, there is the continent of Africa. And if we mean exactly what we have been saying about our global responsibilities, we may at any time be drawn into Africa.

Our official doctrine is that we must be prepared to police the world against aggression because there is no other power which can police the world.

Before we say that too many times too loudly, let us do a little calculating. How many Vietnams and Dominican Republics can the Marines police at one and the same time? Yet, there is nothing to assure us that the disorder which broke out in Santo Domingo will not break out elsewhere in this hemisphere. Nor is there anything to assure us that the troubles in Vietnam will not spread to the rest of Indochina and to Korea and to Burma, or that there will not be a war between India and Pakistan.

Our officials try to protect us from this global nightmare by saying that we shall not have to police disorder everywhere because, in fact, all the revolutionary disorders are controlled, supported, and directed from Red China, with an assist from the Soviet Union. This is a piece of mythology. The essential fact about these disorders is that they are at bottom indigenous to the countries where the social order is broken down, not originally, not essentially, conspiracies engineered from the centers of Communist power.

The use of the official myth serves, however, to reassure our own people that Mr. Johnson is not going to take part in an unending series of wars. Our people are supposed to believe that if we win the war in Vietnam (which is not easy to do), Asia will be safe and we shall have seen the dawn of an era of world peace. For the masterminds of revolution will have been taught their lesson.

One of the great American fallacies is that every war we have to fight is a war to end all war, and the key that will unlock the door to a lasting peace. In order to make ourselves believe this, we have to convince ourselves that the enemy, whoever he happens to be at the moment, is the mastermind of a universal conspiracy. Once the mastermind has been knocked out, all the bad things will disappear.

Changes. If we are to have a sound and workable foreign policy, we shall have to purge our minds of the myths that we live by in wartime. The universal conspiracy remains a part of the furniture of our thinking, but the mastermind behind the universal conspiracy changes as our adversary changes. The Germans and the Japanese who were the masterminds in 1941 are now our allies, and our wartime ally, the Soviet Union, became the mastermind and remained so until China supplanted it. Surely it is time to grow up.